DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 058 CS 500 564

AUTHOR Kramer, Cheris
TITLE Women's Rhetoric in "New Yorker" Cartoons: Patterns for a Mildred Milquetoast.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (59th, New York City, November 8-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Cartoons; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Females; Human Relations; Interpersonal Relationship; Males; Mass Media; Periodicals; Role Perception; *Sex (Characteristics); Sex Discrimination; *Social Attitudes; Social Influences

ABSTRACT

The rhetorical possibilities available to women in contemporary society may be determined by analyzing how women's speech is distinguished from male's speech in cartoons. This comic genre both reflects and helps establish social stereotypes. During the period between February 17 and May 12, 1973, 152 cartoons in the "New Yorker" (a general circulation magazine considered an innovator and leader in the field of cartooning) were analyzed. A questionnaire consisting of a list of captions from cartoons in the "New Yorker" was also distributed to 50 men and women in speech classes at the University of Illinois, with directions to indicate whether the statements were spoken by a male or female and why. To determine whether the treatment of women's rhetoric in the "New Yorker" cartoons was representative of mass circulation magazines, 56 syndicated cartoons from the Sunday comics section of the Chicago "Daily News" were analyzed for the same three-month period. Data resulting from the study of the cartoons suggested that women use a more restricted, weaker language than men. Women cartoon characters used fewer exclamations and curse words and did not converse about traditionally male topics such as finance or politics. (EE)

ED 087058

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

WOMEN'S RHETORIC IN NEW YORKER CARTOONS: PATTERNS FOR A MILDRED MILQUETOAST

Cheris Kramer
Department of Speech Communication
University of Illinois

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Cheris Kramer
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Paper presented at the
Speech Communication Association Convention
November 8-11, 1973

CS 500 564

Comic art is one field of communication that takes a great deal of its material from the relationship between men and women. While there is presently a revival of interest in comic books and comic strips, there has been little interest in analyzing the social cartoon. This paper is an exploratory probe into one aspect--an important aspect--of cartooning: the way women's speech is represented in social cartoons. What speech patterns are considered feminine? What topics? What vocabulary? In what places can a woman speak with authority? In what places should she remain quiet or else appear silly?

The representation of women's speech in cartoons has a direct reference to the rhetorical possibilities which society sees open to women since humor is often basically a matter of exaggeration of stereotypes.

I have looked at the cartoons in three consecutive months of the New Yorker--February 17 through May 12, 1973. The New Yorker was chosen because it is a general circulation magazine with both female and male readers, and because it has been considered by cartoonists and by critics of the comic art as being the innovator, the leader in the field of cartooning, according to cartoonists Alan Dunn, who describes how the New Yorker came to dominate, through a "succinct, literate approach to the social scene," the entire field of cartooning in weeklies.[1]

---

[1]Alan Dunn, A Portfolio of Social Cartoons 1957-1968 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 158.

The influence of the New Yorker cartoons on the general public is, to a great extent, indirect. The New Yorker has a circulation of only 465,000. (This can be compared to the Reader's Digest, which has a circulation in the United States of 17,900,000.)[2] The cartoons of the New Yorker concentrate on the doings and sayings of the American upper middle class, another restriction which might make the cartoons less than representative of American cartoons in general (though there are not many cartoons anywhere dealing with the American lower class). But if the New Yorker cartoons are the ones which will set the guidelines for the cartoonists in other periodicals, it would seem worthwhile to get some idea of how women's rhetoric is represented in the New Yorker cartoons.

To see if the treatment of women's rhetoric in these cartoons is similar to that in some mass circulation cartoons, I have looked at the syndicated cartoons in the Sunday comics section of the Chicago Daily News for the same three-month period. I also made use of a questionnaire given to twenty-five men and twenty-five women, students in speech classes at the University of Illinois, to help me identify some of the characteristics of women's rhetoric in the cartoons. (Only the cartoons which contain dialogue among adult humans were used. No sign jokes or animal jokes or purely pictorial jokes were used.) A list of the captions from cartoons in four consecutive issues of the New Yorker (March 17 through April 7, 1973) was given to each student. The statements were not identified as coming from the New Yorker. The only direction was "Please indicate by X whether you think the following statements are spoken by a male or a female." At the end of the list was a question, "What helped guide you

---

[2]William A. Katz, Magazines for Libraries (New York: Bowker, 1972), pp. 372,373.

in making your choices?" followed by a space for their answers. (No student indicated she or he had seen the statements in the New Yorker.) The tabulation and the answers to the question (see Appendix) indicate that there are a number of characteristics attributed by the students to either women's speech or to men's speech.[3]

It is difficult to quantify the elements of a cartoon. For example, it would seem to be possible to check the number of times such words as "nice," "pretty," "cute," and "beautiful" are used by women and by men to establish some sex-related vocabulary differences. But sometimes (in order to support a joke involving some other topic) such words seem to be used merely to identify, say, a woman as being a person who holds traditional ideas about the role of the woman, while at other times the use of such words will be the joke, as when a woman uses them while talking about a traditionally masculine subject. Or the cartoon might have a man use them to indicate a role reversal. I could find no systematic way categorizing the funniness of a cartoon. A joke, if it is a good joke, is unique in some respect.

Nonetheless, it is possible on the basis of a study of the material I indicate (152 New Yorker cartoons and fifty-six cartoons from the Daily News) to make some generalizations about the way women's rhetoric is represented.

---

[3]This is an exploratory study. Students included freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students; it is possible that sensitivity to sex-linked speech differences changes with age, and a further study I have begun will consider this possibility. It is also possible that the cues a student lists as being those important to his choice are not the ones he is actually using. Further work will compare the stated cues with a content analysis.

The basic points to be made are that men's speech and women's speech are different, and that an important difference is that women's speech is more restricted. It cannot be spoken in as many different places as men's speech. It cannot deal effectively with a number of topics, such as finance and politics, which have great importance in our culture. Women are permitted a more narrow range of ways to address other people. Women's speech is weaker than men's speech in emphasis; there are fewer uses of exclamations and of curse words.

Whether housewife, secretary, shopper (or, in the case of several Daily News cartoons, car wrecker)--the most popular categories--women all have the same restricted language. Men--husbands, businessmen, bosses, salesmen, doctors (and their list of possibilities in cartoon occupations is much greater than this)--have more varied speech patterns. The salesman, for example, uses flattery; he will likely address potential customers by a formal title. The husband and boss, both often in commanding situations, may use more swear words. Men's speech, then, is more varied than women's; and men's speech in itself does not have delimiting characteristics that can serve as a focus for the humor in a cartoon.

One of the first discoveries derived from a study of cartoons from the New Yorker and from the Chicago Daily News comics supplement is that women do not speak in as many cartoons as men. In the 152 New Yorker cartoons, men speak a total of 110 times. (It is 112 times if we assume that the commanding voice from the clouds represents a masculine God and that the voice on the phone telling an elephant trainer to "Give him two bottles of aspirin and call me in the morning" is a male, as most veterinarians are.) Women speak only forty times. For the Daily News cartoons the figures are thirty-four and twenty. Considering that an important stereotype in our society is that women

talk a lot, these figures compel efforts at explanation. Possible reasons for this imbalance would include the following: most cartoonists are men; they deal with what they know best and what they think are important foibles of societies, and perhaps women and their activities do not fall into these areas. Another possibility is contained in student (female) comments: "Men try harder to be funny" and ". . . comic statements seem generally to be made by men." Perhaps the cartoons reflect real life, where men like to have the last, topping word.

The statements about the restrictions on women's rhetoric can be illustrated.

First, women's speech is restricted to fewer locations than men's speech. While in the 152 New Yorker cartoons men speak in a total of thirty-eight different places, women speak in a total of sixteen different places. (For the Daily News cartoons the corresponding numbers are fifteen and seven.) Men are given speech at such varied places as court room, doctor's office, psychiatrist's office, police car, art museum, and florist's. Men are in control of the language in all these places; they do not say things that are inappropriate for the location. Men speak in a home only twenty of the 112 times they talk (not counting cocktail parties).

Women, however, speak at home twenty of the forty-three times they speak in the cartoons (not counting cocktail parties). In fact, for four of the thirteen issues of the New Yorker looked at, the cartoons do not show her speaking outside a home.

And when women in cartoons do leave the home, they often seem incapable of handling the language of the new location. So we have the matron talking to a broker who is sitting tight-lipped, barely patient: "Now tell me, Mr. Hilbert, does Merrill Lynch think utilities are going to keep on being iffy?"

(March 24). An enthusiastic woman at a cocktail party says to a man: "You have no idea how refreshing it is to meet someone raffish in West Hartford" (May 12). Or the woman to the male salesman in the bookstore: "Do you have any jolly fiction?" (February 17). These are funny (subtly, in the New Yorker way) because there is a word in each that does not quite belong--at least in that setting. One student, a male, wrote, "Guys always seem to use simpler, more direct language. Some words like 'iffy' are just not used often by guys." Comments by other students, male and female, mention the same belief that women do not control a "business-like" rhetoric. Describing the way they allocated statements as belonging to men or to women, students write: "Men are more economy-minded." "Business-like statements, I attributed to males." "I equated money and jobs with males." "Business language = male." and "Usually lines that are more business-like went to men."

There are, then, also restrictions on the topics which women can discuss. Men in the New Yorker cartoons discuss with authority business and court room matters, politics, age, taxes, household expenses, women's speech, electronic bugging, church collections, kissing, baseball, human relationships, and health. Women discuss social life, books, food and drink, pornography, life's troubles, care of husband, social work, age, and life style. We have heard what happens to the women trying to discuss stocks. Here is a woman listening with her husband to TV news and trying to keep up with current political events: "I keep forgetting. Which is the good guy--Prince Souvanna Phouma or Prince Souphanouvong?" (One can imagine hearing a man asking a similar question but instead of the self-deprecating "I keep forgetting" the caption would probably go something like "Damn it. How are we supposed to remember which one is Phouma and which is Souphanouvong?") Forty of the fifty students filling out the questionnaire assigned this statement to a woman. Twenty-two

of the men and twenty-four of the women give the line "The crocuses are up!" to a woman. (Actually, the cartoon shows a man entering a dark bar full of scowling faces, flinging up his arms and crying this.)

In the cartoons women seldom talk to more than one person. In the New Yorker cartoons men talk to two or more people twenty-three times; women talk to two or more people only seven times. (I counted the number of people addressed or people listening.) Men talk to groups in a variety of places: office, court room, bar, cocktail party, massage parlor, ship, on the plains (to a gathering of prophets), church, radio station mike, men's club, press conference, police station, art museum, airplane, on suburban lot. Women talked to two or more people in homes, store, airplane, office, and at cocktail parties. Listen to the speech outside the home: In the airplane the wife speaks from her seat to the stewardess: "He'll fasten his seat belt when I tell him to fasten his seat belt" (March 3). With a female companion at her side, the woman says to the store owner: "Don't think you can make hay now just because Bess Myerson has quit" (March 31). Only once does she talk to more than three other people--and then the cartoon shows a woman conscious of the role reversal; the woman sitting at the head of the conference table says to the six businessmen at the table: "I want you to know, gentlemen, that at this moment I feel I have realized my full potential as a woman" (April 21). (The Daily News syndicated cartoons, done by two artists--Ed Reed and Bob Barnes, show a similar pattern. In the fifty-six cartoons only once does a woman speak to another woman. Men speak to men thirteen times.)

When women do speak in cartoons, they are usually not as forceful as men. One manifestation of this further restriction imposed by cartoonists on the rhetoric women can use is the relatively small number of times women use exclamations. Only five times in the New Yorker cartoons is there an excla-

mation point in the dialogue of a woman speaking to another adult. This can be compared to twenty-seven times for the men. Of course, men control the captions in many more cartoons. But checking just the times that men talk to women or women talk to men we find that exclamation points are used in fourteen speeches given by men and in five speeches given by women--the only five speeches in which they employ exclamatory language. And the exclamation point seems to be used in different ways. The boss with a scowl yells into his intercom: "Miss Carter! Where's my imput?" (February 17); the husband says to his wife: "Damn it, Gertrude, Abe Meame isn't supposed to turn you on!" (May 12). But the woman is as likely as not to have the exclamation point attached to an enthusiastic remark. The woman, as a guest, admiring a picture says: "Aren't you lucky! Very few people have anything original that's nice" (February 24). Or the woman greeting her stooped husband with briefcase coming in the front door says: "Oh dear! Something untoward?" (February 24). Or the woman opening the door for her young, mod husband says: "And here he is! Rip Jenkins, rising young performer and frequent guest on the late-night talk shows. Please welcome him" (April 21). There is some sarcasm in that last statement, perhaps, but it is an enthusiastic statement which shows some interest in another person, at least, unlike the exclamation points of many of the male speeches which seem to carry impatience with them.

There is another restriction on the forcefulness of women's speech. Men in the cartoons were allowed to swear much more freely than women. In the sample of New Yorker cartoons, men use swear words thirteen times, while women use them two times. And one of the two times a woman is playing with the words. She says to her husband, who is departing with a briefcase: "Have a good day, for God's sake!" (March 31). This statement actually seems to reinforce the idea that it is men who swear. The other use of a curse by a woman seems to be

the result of what appears to be extreme provocation. A woman says to her husband who is pouring drinks in the home: "My God, I mean is that really all you can say about me--I've stood the test of time?" (April 21). Curses from men seem to be called forth by more trivial things. For example, a couple is dining in a restaurant when he says: "To hell with what the Sierra Club could do with the cost of a single F-111 fighter plane. Think what I could do with the cost of a single F-111 fighter plane!" (April 14). With the "hell," the "masculine" topic, and the emphatic "I" it is unlikely that the speaker would be mistaken for a woman.

Many of the students commented on the way curse words or harsh language distinguishes men's speech from women's speech. Female students wrote: "Sarcastic, rough-language statements are generally marked male." "It seems more likely that a guy would use the profanities." "I stereotyped swearing and the interjection 'Hey!' to be masculine. . . . I equated flowers with females." "I tended to think that the 'harsh and crude' statements were made by the men. Where the softer statements were spoken by the woman. Also I tended to think that the statements that were kind of 'dumb' were made by the woman. The swearing by the man." "I think men are usually more blunt and to the point in the things they say while women tend to 'flower up' their expressions with old sayings." "Women come across more subtly in their disappointment or disgust; guys are very blatant about it." Men wrote: "Harsh words (assertive phrases_-generally male" and "harsh language=male."

The women in the New Yorker cartoons have a more restrictive address system. Here is how men address women: Miss Carter, Edith, dear, woman, Madam (again assuming the voice from the heavens is male), Bea, Ms. Hathaway (a Women's Lib cartoon), and Gertrude. Women addressing men used either first name (for their husbands) or a formal address: Charles, Bela, Elwood, Mr.

Hilbert, gentlemen, and Dr. Powers. Only once does a woman address another woman: a social worker addresses a welfare recipient as Mrs. Segarra. Here is the rich variety of addresses used by men to other men: Fenton, T.B., Your Honor, Doc, Evan, young man, you idiot, Charlie, sir (from a burglar), Seth, Schmidt, Mac, Mr. Hadley (from a salesman), Buster, Harkins, son, and Dick. This gives evidence of the flexibility of the address system used by men in cartoons. (In real life, as in cartoons, I think women often avoid addressing men outside the family--perhaps because more societal restrictions on the types of address women can use do exist in real life. Certainly it is true that address systems for men and for women working, say, in an office are often not parallel. In some cases the women behind the typewriters may be addressed as Betty or Jane or "girls," although they cannot address the men as Bob or Jack or "boys.")

The world that the people in the New Yorker cartoons live in is almost childless. There are only some hints of the language mothers use with their children. One cartoon shows two men, one disgusted, the other puzzled, waiting in line and listening to the woman talking on a public phone: "Yes you are. You're my little snookums. Well, bye-bye for now, Sweetie Pie. Mommy's got to go. . . . Hi. Was she wagging her tail?" (March 3). There is a type of speech that seems recognizable as mommy talk. The idea that women must change vocabularies when location and personnel change (true also for men but likely not to the same degree) is indicated in the cartoon which has a man at a bar talking to the bartender about the woman who is stretched out on top of the bar: "The lady has a point! After drinking all day long, how can a woman go home to her children and say, 'Children, get your jammies on'?" (February 24).

Study of the cartoons and of the completed student questionnaires indicates that there might be other characteristics which are thought to be more particularly a part of women's rhetoric than of men's. Twenty of the twenty-five male students and eighteen of the twenty-five female students assigned the following statement to a woman: "Can't you just say 'Scarlatti' instead of 'Scarlatti, of course'?" (March 17). Perhaps this is considered female (the artist portrayed it this way also) because it would be the male who would be more likely to use the more positive "of course." One male student wrote in his general comments, "The self-centered statements are the males'." A female student wrote, "Many of the 'conceited' statements seemed to be made by men, probably because that's where most come from in 'real life.'" Another female student wrote, "Female--usually to do with meals or feelings. Male--statements of a show-off; to do with money--condescending."

All but two of the men and two of the women assigned "I'm probably old-fashioned, but I felt much more at home with the Forsytes than I do with the Louds" (March 17) to a female. In her general comments one female student wrote, "Women are more likely to pre-empt their statements with excuses for themselves, 'I may be old fashioned, but--' . . . women are more concerned with a smooth emotional atmosphere."

The study of the cartoons, then, shows women using a more restricted, weaker language than men. Women do not speak in as many different places as do men; they do not customarily deal with a number of topics, such as finance and politics, which have great importance in our culture. The speech of women, as represented in the cartoons, has a more narrow range of ways to address other people. It makes less use of exclamations and of curse words--words which our culture considers "strong" words. Obviously, the words, phrases,

and sentence patterns in themselves are not strong or weak; only in the context of the culture's values do they either have or not have strength.

If we want to determine what rhetorical possibilities are available to women today it is helpful to take a look at the way women speak in today's cartoons to get some sense of what characteristics are seen, at least by some cartoonists, as setting women's speech apart from men's speech. What is said in the cartoons is important for several reasons. First, our media not only reflect societal norms but also help establish them. Second, empirical research needs to be done to determine how women do speak; cartoons offer a rich source of characteristics to test.

APPENDIX

I

Sex of Participant	Agreement on sex of speakers of the 49 cartoon statements statements			
	22-25 agree*	19-21 agree*	16-18 agree*	13-15 agree*
Males	14	14	10	11
Females	13	7	16	13

*Numbers in each vertical column do not necessarily represent the same cartoon statements.

II

	Differences between number of males and number of females who agree on sex of speaker							
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Number of cartoon statements	10	7	12	7	9	2	1	1